commonwealth essays and studies

**Commonwealth Essays and Studies**

**42.1 | 2019**
**Revolution(s)**

# Mutations of the "Mutiny novel": From Historical Fiction to Historical Metafiction and Neo-Victorianism

**Jaine Chemmachery**

OpenEdition Journals

**Electronic version**
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/ces/741
DOI: 10.4000/ces.741
ISSN: 2534-6695

**Publisher**
SEPC (Société d'études des pays du Commonwealth)

**Electronic reference**
Jaine Chemmachery, « Mutations of the "Mutiny novel": From Historical Fiction to Historical Metafiction and Neo-Victorianism », *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* [Online], 42.1 | 2019, Online since 20 December 2019, connection on 04 February 2020. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/ces/741 ; DOI : 10.4000/ces.741

# Mutations of the “Mutiny novel”: From Historical Fiction to Historical Metafiction and Neo-Victorianism

Jaine Chemmachery

1 The “Mutiny novel” was a famous sub-genre of British literature in the second half of the nineteenth century, belonging to the genre of “historical fiction.” The label “Mutiny Novel” refers to “historical novels in whose plot the rebellion plays a more or less substantial role” (Nicora 2013, 11). The Indian Mutiny was indeed a historical rebellion led by soldiers of the Bengal Army which officially started on May 10, 1857, in Meerut. It was characterised by its extreme violence. According to Indrani Sen,

> Several theories about the Revolt abounded in the nineteenth-century colonial mind. It was variously held to have been caused by religious fears of conversion, by sepoy unrest, disaffection among the peasants and talukdars – and not least of all, by a yearning for lost power among the “native” princes. (2007, 1754)

The Indian mutiny is a critical moment for the history of the British Empire which led to massive British retaliation involving villages burnt and numerous murders to avenge the deaths on the British side and deter any future rebellious acts. It also brought nothing less than the transfer of power from the East India Company to the Crown, hence a shift from British economic monopoly over Indian raw materials to political dominion.

2 The great variety of terms used to define the events shows the various ideological intentions implied by them. The Mutiny has indeed variously been called the “Epic of race” (Flora Annie Steel), the Indian war of independence (by the Indian nationalist Sarvakar, 1909), the “Indian Rebellion of 1857” (by the historian Michael Edwardes), the “Indian Sepoy Rebellion” (by the literary critic Flaminia Nicora), etc. The very fact that the genre is mainly referred to as “Mutiny Novel” positions it in the realm of Englishness as the English were the ones likely to think of the events as a mutiny, not as a war of independence. But the Uprising is undeniably part of British and Indian histories.

3 As Hilda Gregg famously wrote in 1897, "Of all the great events of this century, as they are reflected in fiction, the Indian Mutiny has taken the firmest hold on the popular imagination" (1897, 218). It seems true, given the enduring quality of the theme, from Edward Money's *The Wife and the Ward; or, a Life's Error* (1859) to Julian Rathbone's *The Mutiny*, in 2007. The Rebellion led to a prolific artistic output through time which helped construct it as a milestone in British cultural imagination. It was a mostly popular form, often seen as lowbrow because of its wide appeal and not so literary nature, yet with variations – both in terms of its relation with the British canon and of quantity. The Mutiny inspired fiction writing throughout the twentieth century, *Nightrunners of Bengal* (1955) by John Masters or *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973) by J.G. Farrell being examples of the genre. The 150th anniversary of the Indian Uprising also led to the publication of a few more "Mutiny-inspired" novels whose ideological stance needs to be analysed.

4 The "Mutiny novel" has thus experienced generic mutation through time, moving from historical fiction to historical metafiction, at least until the 1970s. One may wonder about the political intentions underlying such changes, as well as the ideological underpinnings of the few contemporary novels on the Mutiny. One also needs to ask what accounts for the longevity of the motif in British fiction. After providing a quick overview of the genre, I will have a look into the "cracks in the corner-stones," in Nicora's terms, before questioning the contemporary persistence of the genre.

## Common tropes of the Mutiny Novel

5 Common features may easily be found in most examples of the genre, from chivalric depictions of British protagonists to elements constructing Indian male characters as savage foils and Englishwomen as damsels in distress, yet sometimes prone to acts of heroism. Such tropes, which are characteristic of colonialist stereotyping, have been present since the birth of the genre. In Steel's *On the Face of the Waters* (1896), one may read: "others, maddened by the smell of blood, the sounds of murder, dragged helpless Englishmen and Englishwomen from their carriages and did them to death savagely" (197). While the Indian characters are shown as beasts, excited by blood and noise, and are associated to violent, inhuman(e) behaviour through terms such as "dragged" or "savagely," Englishmen are granted a form of grandeur which takes them out of the realm of the human as well, locating them on the opposite side of the spectrum: "As he [a British man] walked away, he seemed to the eyes watching him *bigger*, more *king-like*, *more heroic than ever*" (375, emphasis added). Englishwomen are turned into helpless creatures in need of protection through the many associations between the verb "protect" and "women," as in M.M. Kaye's *Shadow of the Moon* (1957): "we must protect the remaining women and children" (2011, 437) or "the women had better go and they will need protection" (440). Yet, in Rathbone's more recent novel, *The Mutiny* (2007), an Englishwoman, Sophie Hardcastle, appears as less in need of English males' protection: "Sophie [...] would rather die than let any harm come to them from these people who had suddenly become for her terrifying exemplars of all the stories she had been told since her arrival of the duplicity, rapacity and savagery the Natives could display when roused" (48). Being the one who "would rather die" than see her fellow countrywomen at the mercy of Indians, she is granted a form of English heroism, which used to be a rather masculine characteristic in earlier Mutiny novels. Yet the enumeration

"duplicity, rapacity and savagery" echoes the stereotypes the Indians have come to be associated with since 1857 in Mutiny fiction, i.e. violence and animality.[1] When it comes to expressing British superiority over Indians, Sophie also perfectly fits the mould:

> Here she was, thousands of miles away, surrounded by an alien people, contributing just a little to the history that brought this rightness, this news, this perfection of understanding, this civilisation and love of God to a benighted land, torn with religious dissension as it had been, chaotic, anarchic. It was a noble calling, a noble company she was part of. Earth's proud empires might indeed pass away, like those of Alexander, Rome and the Mughals, but this one, being the empire of God as well as Queen Victoria would not. On it, with God's blessing, she thought [...] the sun would never set. (20)

Even though the pompous tone and the use of internal focalisation may be ironical, as the narrative voice would know of the future end of the British Empire, the mindset of Sophie, herself modelled on the "New Woman," is very much informed by English imperialist doctrine.

6 The rape of Englishwomen by Indian men is also a recurrent motif in the genre. In one early Mutiny novel, Grant's *First Love and Last Love: A Tale of the Indian Mutiny* (1868), one reads: "women were outraged again and again, ere they were slaughtered, riddled with musket balls, or gashed by bayonets" (3–4). Almost a century after this evocation of Englishwomen being raped by Indian men, Kaye re-uses the topos: "where her breasts had been there was now only blood. And she had been raped before she died" (2011, 475). As Nancy Paxton recalls: "This familiar version of the colonial rape narrative became popular after the Indian Uprising of 1857 when dozens of British and Anglo-Indian novelists began to write and rewrite narratives about the Mutiny which hinged on the rape of English women by Indian men" (1992, 6). The rape motif aptly articulates English heroism, Indian brutality, and Englishwomen in distress, as Paxton shows:

> Novels written after 1857 which were organised around this narrative [the rape narrative] naturalised British colonizers' dominance by asserting the lawlessness of Indian men, and at the same time, shored up traditional gender roles by assigning to British women the role of victim, countering British feminist demands for women's greater political and social equality. In short, texts which focus on the rape of English women by Indian men were used to mobilise literary traditions about chivalry in service to the Raj. (6)

It also creates a parallel between national and gender issues. After 1857, Englishwomen's bodies came to symbolise how the British Empire's integrity was threatened by Indians while domestic defilement became a recurrent theme in the press.

7 What is important to reassert is that the Mutiny was a historical event, but also a cultural and literary one. According to Herbert, the traumatic impact of the Rebellion on Victorian and post-Victorian consciousness can only be analysed by considering it not as "a geopolitical event but as a literary and in effect a fictive one – as a story recounted over and over, in one stylistic inflection and literary register after another" (2008, 115). Linguistic proximity was visible in both the press and fiction, especially when the 1857 events were presented along the lines of sensationalism. A proper Mutiny hypertext came to be created by the many works of fiction which have constituted the genre, with the more recent ones indirectly quoting and assuredly drawing on the former's motifs and imagery. Kaye's *Shadow of the Moon* (1957) stages for instance the following scene:

> A *dark*, *sinewy* hand clutched at Delia's curls, caught them and dragged her back. The sickle swept, and Delia's *severed head*, its mouth still open and its blue eyes wide in *terror*, remained in the man's hand dangling by its curls, while her body fell sideways in a foam of gay muslin flounces. (2011, 478; emphasis added)

A Gothic subtext is present through the use of a noun such as "terror" while the quote evokes violence, to say the least. Similar imagery is to be found in more recent Mutiny fiction:

> The butcher. [...] [F]rom behind he wound her hair round his left hand and pinned her hair to the floor, drew the knife and neatly, just as he did with pigs, slit her throat, opening the jugular vein. He held her down as the blood spurted [...] again using almost surgical skill, dissected out from her womb the still living foetus of a tiny girl, cut the umbilical chord and placed the baby on its dead mother's breast. (Rathbone 2007, 152–53)

Explicit images are exposed in a clinical description which echoes the adjective "surgical" present in the quote. Such excess in representation and revelling in graphic detail[2] actually counter another feature of the genre, the un-representable nature of the Mutiny, which links it to trauma. Here are instances where the traumatic event appears to be "unsayable": "The worst horrors of that night, we are told, can never be known" (Steel 1896, 200) or "There is danger here for all of your blood. No, not in Lucknow only, or in Oudh, but in all India. I have heard.... things. Things I dare not tell you. But it is true what I say" (Kaye 2011, 406). The presence of vague terms such as "things" or even "horrors", along with negative conjunctions or adverbs ("no," "never") associated with verbs of communication construct the event as both horrific and impossible to narrate.

8 The idea that the 1857 Uprising is the ultimate trauma for the Victorians has been developed by Christopher Herbert:

> Far from seeming a quarry of materials readily and unproblematically translatable [...] the great Indian upheaval seemed to many to define itself first and foremost by virtue of its unnerving recalcitrance to representation [...] It was a story that in many ways, so contemporaries never tired of stating, could not be written. (2008, 20)

9 All such themes were used to build the myth of British heroism, justify retaliation after 1857, legitimise their presence in India and exorcise anxieties that emerged at the time in regard to British involvement in the Indian subcontinent.

10 The tropes aforementioned link the genre to adventure fiction and romance, but also melodrama. In its Mutiny version, melodrama becomes "a near expressionistic Manichean conflict between Good and Evil, a focus on the times of crisis in the plot and a privileging of the intensification of feelings over psychological complexity" (Nicora 2009, 94). Other characteristic elements would be the centrality of the siege of the British in the narratives and the references to emblematic locations such as Meerut, Cawnpore,[3] or Delhi. Flaminia Nicora, in her study of the genre, provides us with an interesting pattern for it. According to her, Mutiny novels abide by the following structure:

1) current lifestyle in Britain, retrospective narrative
2) description of life in administrative quarters before the outbreak
3) arrival from Britain
4) hunting scenes
5) outbreak and resistance of the British
6) support of allied troops
7) revenge

8) restoration of order, wedding
9) return to England (Nicora 2013, 107)

11 The outline provides a reassuring structure for readers with order being finally restored. An interesting feature of the genre is also the hybrid figure of the "bourgeois knight" (Nicora 2009, 89) which is simultaneously an oxymoron and a unique narrative paradigm, suited to mass-market society, "where the individual dimension of the chivalric hero in the courtly world is multiplied indefinite times in upper middle-class characters, who retain their distinctiveness in spite of their potential interchangeable nature, given the homogeneity of their role" (Nicora 2009, 89). This – along with the genre's depiction of racial and gender roles, its focus on British heroism and suffering, its sensationalism which sometimes produces the effect of an ahistorical narrative – structures a homogeneous corpus which provided British readers with identity models and images of British military and moral success. In Nicora's terms, "the Mutiny becomes a momentous episode in the *grand récit* of British national history" (2009, 15).

## A brief chronology of the genre

12 Between 1858 and 1880, writers of Munity novels were mostly non-professional writers coming from the ranks of the army, or civil servants of the East India Company who had often been personally involved in the war like Colonel Edward Money or Philip Meadows Taylor. These authors wrote in a context of intense written production on the events, constituted of reports, personal accounts, press articles, letters, cartoons, etc. In one of the first Mutiny novels, *The Wife and the Ward*, published in 1859 by Lieutenant-Colonel Edward Money, the rape theme was already present, as well as the Mutiny being paradoxically both traumatic, and thus unspeakable, and an event of a discursive nature:

> "Did you hear all the horrors perpetrated at Delhi on the ladies?" [...] "Yes and no: I heard a great deal from my ayah, and saw much in one of the Calcutta papers; but poor Mrs. Peters would never talk much about it; she said it was not a fit subject for me as an unmarried girl." (24)

The presence of the many verbs of communication – hear, say, talk – as well as the mention of the Calcutta papers hint at the discursive nature of the Mutiny while the reference to a "fit subject," along with the encompassing, albeit vague noun "horrors" points to the difficulty of narrating the Uprising.

13 The span of time between the 1880s and the 1910s is the most prolific period for the genre. According to Chakravarty, about 20 Mutiny novels were published just in the 1890s, reaching out to a more juvenile public with G.A. Henty's *In Times of Peril* (1881). Two main trends could be perceived: sensational fiction (aimed at women), and adventure fiction. This accounts for the fact that such novels have not made it into the British literary canon; romance and adventure fiction, though popular among the public, have long been overlooked by literary criticism. At a time of anxiety due to the difficulties experienced by the Empire and the long Boer war, such novels offered the British positive identity models as an antidote.

14 Romance, in particular, turns useful when it comes to promoting imperial values: in the case of Mutiny novels, "the love story and the rebellion are completely entangled: the resistance to the natives works as a test that unveils the true qualities of man and women [*sic*]." (Nicora 2013, 108). From Flora Annie Steel's *On the Face of the Waters* (1896)

to M.M. Kaye's *Shadow of the Moon* (1957), the Mutiny often works as testing ground for men and women. In *Shadow of the Moon*, Winter de Ballesteros, a young Anglo-Spanish heiress, is promised to an English man who is known to be a womaniser and a drug-addict. She is to be escorted to her future husband by Alex Randall with whom she faces the Uprising and who proves to be a better match that she later marries.

15 Between the 1920s and the 1960s, there are very few Mutiny novels, which is probably linked to the issues England faced in the middle of the twentieth century. The 1920s witnessed the rise of nationalist movements in India while the following years were to be associated with Britain's loss of prestige and resources during the two World Wars. This was assuredly not the right time to promote the superiority of English civilisation and culture over the East. The Cold War also led England to try to position itself among the world's superpowers and the last decade saw indeed a re-emergence of the Mutiny motif in M.M. Kaye's *Shadow of the Moon* (1957), for instance.

16 Between the 1970s and 1980s, two main trends are recognisable: one consisting in parodying the genre; the other, in revisiting history from a nostalgic vantage point. Examples of the former are J.G. Farrell's *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973) or George Macdonald Fraser's *Flashman* series (1969-2005). Farrell took the Mutiny novel out of its peripheral position in the literary scene and located it within the British literary canon with its postmodern poetics. Several "postcolonial Mutiny novels" have indeed a critical take on the Empire. Their aim is to reveal "the imperialistic underlay of certain narrative acts, and the – at times ambivalent – postcolonial deconstruction of imperialist modes of representation" (Nicora 2009, 11).

17 The second trend, the nostalgic revisitation of the Indian Mutiny, is embodied by Kaye's *Shadow of the Moon* (1957) or *Far Pavillions* (1978) where nostalgia and romance work together. In *Far Pavillions*, the love story between two English characters is set in an exotic Indian context, in the wake of the Rebellion. This trend toward nostalgia needs to be seen in relation with Thatcher's praise of Victorian values in the 1980s: "I was brought up by a Victorian Grandmother. We were taught to work jolly hard. We were taught to prove yourself; we were taught self-relianc e [....]. You were taught tremendous pride in your country. All of these are Victorian values. They are also perennial values."[4] In the 1970s and 80s, the function of the Mutiny Novel was to act as "rearguard battle fought by conservative forces so as to oppose the loss of international prestige and the crumbling of ethnic cohesion caused by immigration" (Nicora 2009, 158). Its resurgence at the time might have something to do with the violence of the Indo-Pakistan War of 1971 which led to the founding of the independent state of Bangladesh, and the internal unrest of the later Indian Emergency from 1975-1977 (Kohlke 2010, 380). While Kaye's texts sometimes reveal traces of a slightly critical stance, they never question British presence in India. The appetite for Kaye's writings led to the creation of a "massive" musical – 5 million pounds were invested in the project – in 2005. Raj nostalgia is also visible in movies such as *Viceroy's House* (2017) or *Victoria's Friend* (2018), and in TV series like *Indian Summers* (2015-2016). This trend revisits the colonial past of Britain while the Rebellion is seen as a hallmark of England's past status as superpower.

18 Since then, few examples of the genre were published until the years 2000s[5] with a quick reference to the Indian Mutiny in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000),[6] new narrative histories reiterating the British version of the "Mutiny" such as Saul David's 2002 *The Indian Mutiny* and two novels that were published in 2007, on the 150th anniversary of

the Rebellion: Julian Rathbone's *The Mutiny: A Novel*, and Garry Kilworth's *Rogue Officer*. A Bollywood production, *The Rising*, also appeared in 2005 (directed by Ketan Mehta).

19 If the Mutiny novel could be seen as "a cultural product instrumental to the consolidation of the colonial value-system, if not quite a form of propaganda" at certain times of history, it is necessary to look for "cracks in the corner-stones" (Nicora 2009, 109) since Mutiny novels, like many other genres, both construct and contest their very ideological frame. The Mutiny novel is certainly characterised by distinctive features such as the promotion of English chivalric masculinity and idea(l)s of Victorian femininity. But Mutiny fiction also reflects contextual anxieties, as the British Empire experienced threats to its security – from Russia (as the novel *Kim* by Kipling underlines), the Boers in South Africa and later, from Germany's growing influence in Europe.

## Analysing the "cracks in the corner-stones"

20 Within any genre, one will find dissenting elements which sometimes question the very epistemic structure to which they belong. This is even more true when one deals with historical fiction which, according to De Groot, can be seen as "a disruptive genre, a series of interventions which have sought to destabilise cultural hegemonies and challenge normalities" (2010, 139). Mutiny fiction is no exception to the rule. In *Seeta* (1972) by Philip Meadows Taylor, one reads about interracial love between the English protagonist, Cyril Brandon, and an Indian woman, Seeta, who is a learned Hindu woman. This audacious inclusion certainly echoes the author's own experience of interracial love – a type of relationship which was seriously compromised in Anglo-Indian society after 1858. After this bold move, "order" is finally restored in the novel since the death of Brandon's Indian wife, who converts to Christianity on her deathbed, enables the Englishman to marry a "proper woman," namely an English one. This example shows that despite some liberties taken from the general canon of Mutiny novels which this very novel helped shape, compliance with imperialist ideology remained essential.

21 Another alternative Mutiny novel is Steel's *On the Face of the Waters* (1896) which highlights interracial female bonding beyond questions of race or class. The English heroine, Kate Erlton, bonds with an Indian princess and her English protector's Indian mistress, Tara, a situation which goes against the imperialist credo of racial separation and offers traditionally subaltern characters of Mutiny fiction a room of their own. Yet, here again, this bold approach is limited as the relationship sorority is temporary. The Indian mistress of the English hero commits suicide, which conveniently enables the latter to marry an English woman. But even if order is finally restored, alternative possibilities and even discourses have emerged in the novel. Steel's work also points to English masculine violence – it is no accident that this should appear in a female author's novel – which questions the cliché, in Mutiny novels, of Indian masculine violence. Mrs. Gissing, an English woman, is threatened by a snake and Jim Douglas, the English hero, comes to rescue her:

> "Keep still!" interrupted a peremptory voice behind her, as a pair of swift unceremonious arms seized her round the waist, and by sheer force dragged her back a step, then held her tight-clasped to something that beat fast despite the calm tone. "Kill that snake, some one! There, right at her feet! It isn't a branch. I saw it move. Don't stir, Mrs. Gissing, it's all right." There was a faint scent of lavender

> about the dress, about her curly hair, which Jim Douglas never forgot; just as he never forgot the passionate admiration which made his hands relax to an infinite tenderness, when she uttered no cry, no sound. (Steel 1896, 123–24)

Even if the man in the end rescues the woman, the words "unceremonious" and "force," and the many action verbs like "seized," "dragged," "held," suggest masculine domination and erotic energy which hint at the possibility of intra-racial, rather than interracial, rape. The depiction of English male violence in the act of protecting an English damsel in distress undercuts the usual stereotype of Indian men as the ones who threatened English women's virtue.

22 Another type of (rare) alternative Mutiny novels is Indian writing about the events, such as Manohar Malgonkar's *The Devil's Wind: Nana Sahib Story* (1972).[7] The novel provides an Indian perspective on Nana Sahib who has been long depicted as the great Indian villain in Mutiny fiction.[8] The novel is a first-person narrative which provides more psychological input on the figure than ever before and rehumanises it. When Nehru and Gandhi preached non-violence, it must have been difficult for Indians to deal with the legacy of the Rebellion. But the lack of Indian Mutiny novels also echoes the aforementioned notion that the Indian Mutiny has long been seen as an English issue rather than an Indian one. For Indian and Pakistani writers writing in English, events like the Partition or the Independence, or even the Jallianwallah bagh massacre of 1919, still seem to be more inspirational objects.[9] One may suspect that authors writing from the ex-colonies are more likely to appropriate events associated with Indian nationalism in their fiction than an event such as the Rebellion which can hardly be associated with the birth of a proper Indian national consciousness, as India was still very much divided into separate entities in 1857.[10]

23 Finally, the case of postcolonial Mutiny novels of the 1970s and 1980s is worth analysing as the two decades are characterised by a subsequent production of Mutiny novels. A novel like Farrell's *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973) participates in the postmodern re-elaboration of Mutiny novels through parodying the genre, both in terms of theme and style, as it trivialises the battle and the siege.[11] Another example is that of the adventures of Fraser's Flashman who, in *Flashman in the Great Game* (1975), is an anti-hero – a coward, a braggart, a liar, a womaniser – who is seen as a hero.[12] Moreover, the fact that Flashman's narrative should be in the first person questions the plausibility of the events narrated. Both novels examine the cultural premises of British colonialism and the formal structure of the Mutiny novel and deconstruct them through parody. In the process, the Mutiny "loses its value as a consensual point of reference and national myth" for England (Nicora 2009, 163). The siege in *The Siege of Krishnapur* is no longer the testing ground of English heroism; it acts rather as a magnifying glass which enables Farrell to expose the contradictions of colonial reality and dismantle the mythology of English heroism during the Mutiny. It also uncannily announces something about the dominance of geopolitics over many other fields. In Farrell's novel, George Fleury, an Englishman who arrives in India shortly before the outbreak, asks: "Why, if the Indian people are happier under our rule [...] do they not emigrate from those native states like Hyderabad which are so dreadfully misgoverned and come and live in British India?" (Farrell 1993, 38). According to Kohlke,

> Farrell's ironic evocation of geopolitics resonates uncannily with their continued dominance in globalised world economies and international relations of the present day, as well as the resulting flow of economic migrants and political and conflict refugees. The Mutiny's excessive violence and conjunction of racial, religious, and nationalist causes could also be read as eerily presaging today's "clash of cultures"

> and the age of global terror, exacerbated by Western nations' neo-imperialist engagements in the Middle East and Asian subcontinent. (Kohlke 2010, 370)

The fact that the Mutiny has been an enduring theme in British literature since 1858 to this day confirms that the implications of the Rebellion resonate with our contemporary world.

## The current persistence of the Mutiny motif and ethics

24 When the Mutiny is not the major theme of fiction, it can still be spotted through a subterranean presence. In 2000, Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* used the Rebellion as a pretext for her Indian hero to question his heritage and feeling of belonging (or not) in contemporary multicultural Britain. Smith's novel is not a Munity novel per se, but the Uprising appears there as a presence in filigree. Two contemporary novels on the 1857 events are Julian Rathbone's *The Mutiny* and Garry Kilworth's *A Rogue Officer*, which both came out in 2007. Rathbone's novel offers an interesting re-imagination of the Victorians with women saying phrases like "oh shit" (2007, 147) or "bastard groped me! He got hold of my tit" (135). The novel plays with Neo-Victorian linguistic straightforwardness and anachronism and tackles contemporary issues in the process. During one sermon, a reverend says about the Rebellion: "You will be killed or worse" leading one of the heroines of his congregation to wonder: "What could possibly be worse than death, it [the voice in her head] wondered [...] Rape? If that's what the reverend meant then he was sadly unaware of how often it occurred in the bedrooms of his congregation" (149). Needless to say, such a statement on marital rape is no topos of the genre. The novel is actually historically well-informed and quite enjoyable. It also elaborates on famous historical events like the circulation of chapatis throughout India before the Uprising or the issue of the cartridges greased with animal fat.[13] Rathbone's novel is a real historical novel of its time which tackles social, contemporary issues such as feminism in a Neo-Victorian vein but remains ideologically tied to the macrotext of Mutiny fiction.

25 One thus wonders if contemporary novels on the Mutiny do not participate in the promotion of a certain idea of Englishness, along with other types of Neo-Victorian works, even if they leave more room to Indian characters or appear as more critical of the British enterprise. According to Kohlke, the Mutiny functions nowadays more as

> an imaginary point of origin for the twentieth-century British identity crisis and "trauma" of the loss of empire, of having to cede its place as dominant world power to the US, the Soviet Union, and later China and seeing its remaining prestige assimilated into the collective of the European Union. (2010, 371)[14]

A few questions, regarding the issue of trauma, could be raised. The Mutiny is still appropriated by British authors, as well as the trauma linked to it. Even if the event is said to be a mutiny from a British point of view, the fact that it claimed lives on both sides suggests more a collective trauma:

> The Uprising of 1857 cannot with any accuracy be characterised as a black-and-white struggle between Indians and Britons, as [...] there were substantial numbers of Indians fighting on both sides. [...] There were hundreds of British but many more thousands of civilian Indian victims of 1857. (Wagner 2010, xxvi)

26 But even in the most recent fictional works on the Mutiny, a difference in treatment when it comes to depicting British and Indian violence is visible: Cawnpore is definitely conjured up as a way to rouse pity and sympathy for the English. A strong divide

remains between the description of Bibi Gahr's victims (the well) as opposed to the emotional detachment accompanying the description of many Indian perpetrators:

> Those who were deemed to have played leading roles were forced to eat pork and beef before being hanged. The Bibigarh murderers were made to lick up at least a square foot each of blood on the floor of the building before they too were hanged on a large banyan tree nearby. (Rathbone 2007, 317)

27 Difference in treatment is also perceptible as regards the depiction of atrocities: the "British mass executions, collective punishments of whole communities, and arbitrary slaughters of civilians" (Kohlke 2010, 385) are often passed over quickly. Even if the narrator says "In truth [...] both sides in the Mutiny behaved appallingly. The scars, the anger and the guilt remain to this day and vitiate all" (Rathbone 2007, 347), one can still feel that the author tips the scales in favour of the British. According to Kohlke, the description of the British taking "time out to trash and burn the towns and villages they passed through" (Rathbone 2007, 304) evokes a "strangely bodiless crime, circumventing the full horror of the offence" (Kohlke 2010, 388).[15]

28 This resonates with the more difficult question of the representation of traumatic events in fiction. The exhibition of and insistence on the violence of brutal deeds may be seen as sensationalism, generate a feeling of distance on the part of readers and prevent any type of identification with the victims. In Farrell's novel, humour and ironic distance make us unable to empathise with the protagonists, be they Indian or English. Kohlke observes that

> Although Farrell's madcap descriptions of death and dying counter traditionally heroic versions of the siege, they do so at the cost of excising any ethical demands on the reader's conscience or sensibility. Farrell's narrative strategy sensationalises trauma, turning it into spectacle, as death is put on display for pleasurable consumption. (2010, 382)

While Kohlke's argument is absolutely relevant, one may wonder whether Farrell intended his work to be part of a trauma-writing corpus. The author does not seem to be interested in assessing anyone's trauma, no matter whether the people concerned are British or Indian. Still, how are we, as readers, to experience the narrative of the Rebellion and the horrors associated with it, if we are deprived of the possibility of assessing the events as horrific? Kohlke also speaks of the issue of British postcolonial novels appropriating guilt for imperial exactions, depriving Indians of the possibility of claiming the Uprising and the trauma caused by it.

29 In many cases, Indians, especially women, are tamed in the English texts, as they are transformed into docile servants/mistresses/ayahs. When women are not domesticated, then the revolution is depicted as arbitrary, sometimes the result of personal vengeance as in *Seeta* (Taylor, 1872); in this case, the narrative deprives the Uprising of its revolutionary, but also collective dimension for the Indians.

30 Hence, the form of compensation provided in Malgonkar's novel offers an original insight into the narration of the Uprising. As a mirror to the real tablet at Cawnpore reading as follows:

> SACRED TO THE PERPETUAL MEMORY OF A GREAT COMPANY OF CHRISTIAN PEOPLE CHIEFLY WOMEN AND CHILDREN WHO, NEAR THIS SPOT WERE CRUELLY MURDERED BY THE FOLLOWERS OF THE REBEL DHONDU PANT OF BITHOOR AND CAST, THE DYING WITH THE DEAD, INTO THE WELL BELOW ON THE 15th DAY OF JULY 1857 (1988, 298)

31 Malgonkar's narrator, Nana Sahib – the great villain of British Mutiny novels – offers the following: "A VILLAGE STOOD HERE. IT WAS BURNED DOWN BY THE MEN OF QUEEN VICTORIA'S ARMY ON THE 12th DAY OF JUNE 1857. THE MEN, WOMEN, AND CHILDREN WHO RAN OUT WERE THROWN BACK INTO THE FIRE. (299) With all the ideological problems this mirror sentence poses, such as the fact of comparing experiences of suffering, the gesture still appears as a way for Indians to reclaim a part of the trauma induced by the Mutiny and carve a space for themselves into the more English-dominated genre of Mutiny fiction.[16]

32 The Mutiny has this compelling iconic status in British literature, "consolidated by its literary and novelistic re-elaborations" (Nicora 2009, 9). It has been seen as shaping English national identity and was almost unanimously interpreted as supporting the national imperialist doctrine. Yet, as with any epistemic form, the genre offers room for dissent, from feminist perspectives on Mutiny fiction's gender stereotypes to postcolonial critical takes on the Empire. Mutiny novels have also reflected issues faced by British society at different historical moments. Contemporary examples of Mutiny fiction also play into nostalgia for a world under control and show that the Uprising still constitutes a fertile literary topos. The fact that it might be the "supreme trauma of the age" (Herbert 2008, 2) may explain the longevity of the motif. This certainly has to do with its ability to tackle contemporary issues of power relations in a globalised world, helping us "reflect[ing] on the interconnections between colonial pasts and postcolonial presents" (Kohlke 2010, 381). With Brexit looming, the future may have a few more revisions of the Mutiny and interpretations of the "English character" in store for us.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

CHAKRAVARTY, Gautam. 2005. *The Indian Mutiny and the British Imagination*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

DE GROOT, Jerome. 2010. *The Historical Novel*. London; New York: Routledge.

EDWARDES, Michael. 1973. *Red Year. The Indian Rebellion of 1857*. London: Hamilton.

FARRELL, J.G. 1993. *The Siege of Krishnapur*. 1973. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.

GRANT, James. 1868. *First Love and Last Love: A Tale of the Indian Mutiny*. London: Routledge.

GREGG, Hilda. 1897. "The Indian Mutiny in Fiction." *Blackwood's Magazine* (Feb.): 218–31.

HERBERT, Christopher. 2008. *War of No Pity: The Indian Mutiny and Victorian Trauma*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

KAYE, M.M. 2011. *Shadow of the Moon*. 1957. London: Penguin.

KOHLKE, Marie Luise. 2010. "Tipoo's Tiger on the Loose: Neo-Victorian Witness-Bearing and the Trauma of the Indian Mutiny." In *Neo-Victorian Tropes of Trauma: The Politics of Bearing After-Witness*

*to Nineteenth-Century Suffering*, edited by Marie Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben, 367–97. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

MACDONALD FRASER, George. 1969. *Flashman*. London: Barrie & Jenkins.

MACDONALD FRASER, George. 1975. *Flashman in the Great Game*. London: Barrie & Jenkins.

MALGONKAR, Manohar. 1972. *The Devil's Wind: Nana Sahib Story*. New Delhi: Penguin.

MASTERS, John. 1962. *Nightrunners of Bengal*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

NICORA, Flaminia. 2009. *The Mutiny Novel, 1857–2007: Literary Responses to the Indian Sepoy Rebellion*. New Delhi: Prestige.

NICORA, Flaminia. 2013. "'Thrilling Empire': Indian History and Questions of Genre in Victorian Popular Fiction." *Linguistics and Literature Studies* 1, no. 2: 105–110.

PAXTON, Nancy L. 1992. "Mobilizing Chivalry: Rape in British Novels about the Indian Uprising of 1857." *Victorian Studies* 36, no. 1 (Autumn): 5-30.

PRIMORAC, Antonija. 2018. "Representing the Past: Gender, Colonial Space and Cultural Nostalgia in Neo-Victorianism on Screen." *Neo-Victorianism on Screen: Postfeminism and Contemporary Adaptations of Victorian Women*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.

RATHBONE, Jonathan. 2007. *The Mutiny*. London: Little, Brown.

SAUL, David. 1857. *The Indian Mutiny*. London: Penguin, 2003.

SAVARKAR, Vinayak Damodar. 1909. *The Indian War of Independence of 1857*. London.

SEN, Indrani. "Inscribing the Rani of Jhansi in Colonial 'Mutiny' Fiction." *Economic and Political Weekly* 42, no.19 (12-18 May 2007): 1754–761.

STEEL, Flora Annie. 1897. *On the Face of the Waters*. Edited by Saros Cowasjee. *A Raj Collection*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

TAYLOR, Philip Meadows. 1872. *Seeta.* 3 vols. London: Henry S. King.

WAGNER, Kim. 2010. *The Great Fear of 1857: Rumors, Conspiracies and the Making of the Indian Uprising.* Witney: Peter Lang.

## NOTES

**1.** The term "roused" indeed conjures up the image of a beast subject to physical stimuli.
**2.** Cf. "The amount of blood was *appalling*, *spouting*, *gushing*, *pouring over* everybody, everything. The noise too was *hellish*: *screams* of pain, *grunts* of rage, terrible anguish cut off with *gasping, bubbling sobs*, the clang of metal when a blade hit a doorway or pillar. What made it yet more *awful* was the density of the crowd – one hundred and ninety-seven victims, of whom one hundred and twenty-four were children or babies, crushed into less than five hundred square feet" (Rathbone 2007, 315, emphasis added).
**3.** Cawnpore helped building the myth of British resilience as one of the most horrific events of the Mutiny occurred there; in June 1857, about 200 English women and children were tortured, killed and thrown into a well. According to Nicora, "for the British public opinion, Cawnpore is the icon of the Mutiny, the place that more than any other elicits strong sensations, nurtured by a certain sadistic voyeurism" (2009, 61).
**4.** This is what Margaret Thatcher said in an interview with Peter Allen in 1980. Conservative MP Jacob Rees Mogg has just published *The Victorians: Twelve Titans Who Forged Britain* (2019) which

equally participates in the nostalgic trend for a Greater Britain – a trend that has been going on for a few decades now. In the current political context, one of the arguments defended by the proponents of Brexit is that the EU threatens British sovereignty as EU rules override national laws. It is therefore interesting to analyse the mutations of the Mutiny novel throughout history in parallel with Britain's craze, especially over the last twenty years, for neo-Victorian productions and their re-imaginings of Victorian Britain – which are not necessarily devoid of critical distance – in light of the nostalgia for a time when Britain was a great power, and an Empire. For further analyses of cultural nostalgia, see Primorac.

**5.** Kohlke recalls that the 1982 Falklands War led to both renewed nationalist sentiments in Britain and artistic recreations of the Raj (2010, 371).

**6.** Samad Iqbal, an immigrant from Bangladesh living in the UK, maintains that his great-grandfather was Mangal Pande, the famous first mutineer of 1857.

**7.** Nicora also refers to Mirza Ruswa's 1899 novel *Umrao Jan Ada* and Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* (1940).

**8.** Nana Sahib, who commanded the siege of Cawnpore, is the one who ordered the sepoys to kill all the English women and children who had been confined in Bibigarh.

**9.** Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) for instance narrates the 1919 massacre from the point of view of a doctor in the native crowd.

**10.** A similar remark can be made about how historical work in India, especially through the Subalternists, has defined the Amritsar Massacre as one main object of research as opposed to the Uprising. According to Kim Wagner, "Modern Indian historiography on 1857 still seems, at least in part, to be responding to the prejudice of colonial accounts" (Wagner 2010, xxvi).

**11.** The following quote which I analysed elsewhere is a typical illustration of Farrell's mock-epic tone: "There appeared to be a carpet of dead bodies. But then he (the Collector) realized that many of these bodies were indeed moving but not very much. A sepoy here was trying to remove a silver fork from one of his lungs, another had received a piece of lightning conductor in his kidneys. A sepoy with a green turban had had his spine shattered by *The Spirit of Science*; others had been struck down by teaspoons, by fish-knives, by marbles; an unfortunate *subadar* had been plucked from this world by the silver sugar-tongs embedded in his brain" (Farrell 1993, 344).

**12.** In the 1970s, George Macdonald Fraser started writing the memoirs of Sir Harry Paget Flashman, a fictional character created by Tom Hughes in *Tom Brown's School Days* (1857). Fraser wrote the character, who was in Hughes' text a school bully, as an illustrious Victorian soldier who took part in many 19$^{th}$-century wars and events even though he was "a scoundrel, a liar, a cheat, a thief, a coward – and, oh yes, a toady" (Macdonald Fraser 1975, 13)

**13.** In February 1857, the British were surprised to see chapatis being circulated from one village to the next in the North-Western provinces and in Central India. Some historians think that the circulation of the chapatis had a direct link with the Uprising while others think that the two phenomena were unrelated. As to the cartridges, the rumor that the British had greased the cartridges to be used by Muslim and Hindu soldiers in the Indian Army is seen as one of the possible reasons for the Rebellion.

**14.** Current discussions in these times of Brexit and populism strongly resonate with Kohlke's argument.

**15.** Such an absence of agents can also be seen in Malgonkar's depiction of British deeds: " [W]omen were dragged out screaming and pounced upon in bazaars, so that the word 'rape' itself acquired plurality, a collective connotation, and people spoke of villages and townships raped, not of single women" (1972, 245).

**16.** Malgonkar's narrator is also ambivalent as he writes of the Cawnpore massacre: "The horrifying details of the manner of their death, of how they were hacked to death by professional butchers because no one else could be persuaded to do the killing, and how the dead and wounded were all flung into the same well *may or may not be true*." (1972, 218; emphasis added).

He then adds: “Even granting that the details have been exaggerated, the fact remains that every single woman and child in the place was killed” (218). After calling Satichaura and Bibighar “ monuments to our brutality” and stating that “excuses cannot make facts vanish” (219), he qualifies his earlier statements by suggesting that these massacres “might never have happened, ” had the British not burnt down other villages.

---

## ABSTRACTS

This article aims to offer a limited panorama of the novels that compose the genre of Mutiny fiction and to analyse its mutations through time. By tracing the generic origins of the Mutiny novel and analysing how it variously draws on the chivalrous tradition, the Gothic, and other genres (adventure fiction, romance, and melodrama, among others), I would like to show that the various examples of the Mutiny novel genre have often been used to promote imperial values, or to criticise the Empire retrospectively, as Flaminia Nicora’s work has shown, but also that these novels have continuously responded to historical events. My contention is that the Mutiny motif has been instrumental in building a historical narrative of England and that its continued presence merits being studied.

## INDEX

**Keywords**: Mutiny novel, historical (meta)fiction, ideology, ethics, trauma

## AUTHOR

### JAINE CHEMMACHERY

Université Paris Dauphine PSL / EA 1569 TransCrit, Université Paris 8
Jaine Chemmachery is Senior Lecturer at University Paris-Dauphine. She wrote a PhD dissertation (2013) on R. Kipling’s and S. Maugham’s colonial short stories. Her main research fields are colonial and postcolonial literature, Victorian and Neo-Victorian literatures, modernity and spectrality studies. Her publications include “‘Bricks Are Undoubtedly an Essential Ingredient of Civilisation’: Layers of Reconstruction in J.G. Farrell’s *The Siege of Krishnapur*” (*Commonwealth Essays and Studies* 40.2, 2018).